

The Playboy of the Netherworld

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Ay, to this end the earth is made a ball—
Else, crawling to the brink, despair would
plunge
Into the infinite eternal air
And leave its sorrows and its sins behind.

Here is the old melancholy of Burton, with
his specula-
dons on the space Hell occupies in the
globe's interior,
fermenting in a more modern mind. Why,
again, have
ghosts and apparitions ceased? There is the
same fantastic
ingenuity in Beddoes' reply, the same wild
eloquence:

To trust in story,
In the old times Death was a feverish sleep,
In which men walked. The other world was
cold
And thinly peopled, so life's emigrants
Came back to mingle with the crowds of
earth.
But, now great cities are transplanted thither,
Memphis and Babylon and either Thebes
And Priam's towery town with its one beech,
The dead are most and merriest: so be sure
There'll be no more haunting till their towns
Are full to the garret: then they'll shut their
gates
To keep the living out.

Such concreteness of vision combined with
passionate
concentration of speech lends the hiss of an
arrow to his
single lines of scorn:

The shallow, tasteless skimmings of their
love . . .
And scratched it on your leaden memories . . .

And lay thee, worm, where thou shalt
multiply.
Indeed, nothing in him has so much the air of
being writ-
ten *con amore*, as these hot gusts from a
furnace-mouth of
hatred. It is as if he had taken to himself that
cry of one of
his characters:

Unmilk me of my mother, and pour in
Salt scorn and steaming hate.

The passions he deals in may be often

poisoned, but
they are at least passion; lack of that might
easily have
become the besetting weakness of a poet
with so much